

FRANCE'S NEW PAROCHIAL NATIONALISM

Isolationism Rallies Under the Red Banner

HERBERT LUETHY

IN AUGUST 1952, in the rudest, remotest corner of Provence, a whole family of English tourists was murdered, and the solution of the crime was blocked for over a year by the local and family solidarity of the murderer's neighbors. The murder, when finally solved, brought out into the spotlight a human type incomprehensible to Western ideologues, but one that has become important lately in many "backward areas," including those of Italy as well as France.

A rich old peasant, one Dominici, lived on his remote estate in Stone Age style, patriarchal ruler of his family; his grownup sons bowed fearfully before him; his wife and daughters-in-law could not eat at his table, but only in the kitchen. He was tyrant of his village, and lord over life and death on his own soil. Nightly he patrolled his wide domains with dog and gun. Finding one night three strangers camped in a tent by the roadside, he shot them dead, man, wife, and child, as if they were wild animals.

This Dominici also happened to be a militant Communist, and the party stretched

its protecting hand over him during the entire investigation of his crime. What, one asks, could "Communism" and "the party" have meant to this prehistoric patriarch, this apparition from primeval days? For the answer, one has to go back into French history.

FRANCE found her fulfillment in the idea of the nation as no other country, after her, has been able to. But that idea, noble, universal and *un-nationalistic* as it is, was never completely realized. The nation, as constituted, was never the whole nation, and its claim to being a totality excluding every organization and association over, outside, or within itself, bore from the first the seeds of its own destruction.

The anti-clericalism the Republic inherited from the Jacobins was but part of the process by which not only dynasty and aristocracy, but also federalism and regionalism, all provincial, local, associational, class, and other autonomies were destroyed—in short, every non-, pre-, or super-national tie that might come between the isolated individual and the "one and indivisible" nation. The struggle against the Church was one with the suppression of the Vendée, the Gironde, Lyons, and finally the Paris Commune itself, the birthplace and dynamo of the Revolution. The fire that fused France into a nation left her with a state that was a lifeless, omnipresent, but powerless abstraction that could act only as a traffic policeman towards its subjects. These had been reduced, in their turn, to mere individuals.

BEHIND it that fire also left as slag those "inner emigrations" which have peopled France ever since then—groups exiled in spirit, if not in the flesh, because they have

FEW political analysts writing in Europe today have HERBERT LUETHY's gift for bringing to the familiar central problems that agitate us internationally, and about which millions of words get written, the fresh illumination that comes when an informed mind searches out the key factors to their source. His study, "Why Five Million Frenchmen Vote Communist," in these pages (September 1951), evoked worldwide comment and became a kind of classic. We predict a similar response to this penetrating appraisal of the causes behind the present French political malaise, and the new role that Communism has come to assume in it. Mr. Luethy was born in Switzerland, took his doctorate at the University of Zurich, and has written several books on economics and social history.

been unable, or unwilling, to accept or be accepted by the nation born in 1789. The greatest of these "inner emigrations" is the Catholic Church.

Nor was the *nation* able to absorb the "post-national" elements that entered France after the Revolution: large-scale industry and its workers, neither of which has been able really to insert itself in the *contrat social* on which a nation of petty bourgeoisie and small peasantry was founded. Republican France has always distrusted modern economy and protected "little" individualistic units against "big" ones. The reason is not far to seek. The social and economic as well as organizational necessities of large-scale industry worked to break both the inner and the outer structure of the nation. On the one hand, there was the Europeanization of heavy industry; on the other, the alienation of the working class, which now represents one more "inner emigration" that feels itself isolated from the French nation.

Thus France's oldest and newest elements—the Church and the aristocracy on the one hand, the workers and the industrialists on the other—have as yet found no place within the supposedly all-embracing totality of the nation.

The split between the included peasant and petty bourgeoisie and the half-excluded industrialist and altogether excluded industrial worker, runs through all the traditional parties and "viewpoints." These long ago ceased to be expressions of a common political will, and now amount to nothing more than loose, formless groupings tied together by personal affinities and traditions. These groups turned party politics into a meaningless game with empty labels serving but to raise a dense fog between the people and their crucial problems. That game—today, as at the time of Munich—breaks up, and politics collapses, in the face of every great national decision.

Meanwhile the *nation* remains the France of the sleepy and protected "small town," of locked doors, shuttered windows, and closed horizons. The whole political fabric of the Republic, the whole structure of established

parties and ideologies, of a democracy hamstrung by mere parliamentarism, is cut to the measure of this little France, to which budgetary deficits, home distilleries, and school vacations seem the problems most suitable for the attention of a great country that prides herself on her universality. Political life is organized around these problems, and these alone satisfy the political needs of the small-town Frenchman.

What they do not satisfy, above all spiritually and morally, are the needs of a nation cast in the role of a great power, a world empire—the needs of France herself, which include those of her working class. That class, in its isolation, gives sullen obedience to the Communist party because the party system and social structure of the petty-bourgeois Republic offer it no future whatsoever.

I

FRENCH Communism has become the acutest and most alarming symptom of the crisis of French national consciousness. At the same time it feeds deliberately on the pathological nationalism incited by this crisis. What may have been, in the beginning, only a tactical masquerade became, somewhere along the way from the watch on the Rhine to the Resistance and participation in the government, a reality—so much so, in fact, that chauvinism has become the distinguishing feature of Communist style in France today.

The French Communist party has taken over everything that could be called the national tradition, lock, stock, and barrel: not only the "revolutionary patriotism" of the Jacobins, which was patriotism turned against an "internal enemy," not only Robespierre, the tyranny of virtue, and the Committee of Public Safety, not only the optimistic rationalism of the Enlightenment, but Joan of Arc and Richelieu, too—not only Marat, but even Maurras. A catch-all of the oddments and remainders, old and new, of French nationalism, Communism alone is "French," there is no patriotism but its patriotism, and no other fatherland but the promised "people's democracy" through

which the Revolution of 1789 will be completed. Accents that used to be characteristic of Action Française now resound in the Communist press, from "Schuman the *boche*" to the words of a gray-headed Communist labor leader who could say of Léon Blum, "Blum—that means flower in Yiddish." A Communist provincial paper complains: "Blum, Schuman, Moch, Mayer—that doesn't smell of French soil." A cartoon in *Humanité* shows the "men of the American party," Schuman, Moch, and Mayer, with hooked noses, listening in perplexity as the "Marseillaise" rises from the Communist benches; they ask each other, "Do you know that tune?" and one answers, "No, it must be one of those French *chansons*."

But Communist chauvinism in France is more than a question of vocabulary and mere unscrupulous rabble-rousing. Nationalism today is the sickness of a nation in search of itself—or of one that has already lost itself. Communism, all over the world, has identified itself with this sickness. It is a waste of time to argue against Marx and Lenin when the opponent is Stalinist Communism, and it is utterly foolish to attempt to fight Stalinism with nationalistic arguments that the Stalinists themselves have salvaged from the garbage cans of history. As it spread through Asia and South America, where it found followers as it could not in industrially developed countries, Communism changed its features, and now comes back to Paris, as Lenin once prophesied, by way of Asia. *Communism no longer means the proletarian revolution, but the nationalistic counter-revolution of pre-capitalistic countries against the industrial West.* In this new form, Communism has been able to re-settle itself in a France fighting against the tide of history and progress.

Nationalism is the reactionary doctrine today: it means the mobilization of every atavistic instinct against international organization; it means the revolt against history—against the demands of life itself. This, precisely, is why it has become the natural instrument of Communist strategy, which hopes by blocking constructive developments

everywhere to bring on that much the sooner the long awaited catastrophe.

THAT Communist nationalism is centrally linked and internationally organized is not surprising, nor as paradoxical as naive people believe who still confuse "national" with "nationalistic." Only ten years ago the Fascist International was still in existence—more dilettante than the Communist one, but at bottom kindred. And the slogan, "Chauvinists of the world, unite!" still has power and meaning. For all chauvinists, Red, Brown, or Black, are united against that mighty groundswell of our day which chafes at national limits. And they are united, also, against the inescapable realization that Europe, with its dozen squabbling autarchies, local imperiums, and petty sovereignties, is crippled and dying.

Revolutionary mystique combined with reactionary practice is the age-old, ever recurring symptom of the collapse of societies built on economies of privilege. At such moments countless men will cling in their despair to all the deficiencies and limitations of an organized stagnation, to their most miserable prerogatives, seeing in these the last bulwarks of their existence. Communism, in its passage through colonial nationalism, has learned to ally itself with this despair—with mandarins, lamas, and bonzes—against "alien influxes," against technology, rationalism, and new cultural forms.

Of course, the French working class is not the famished, fanaticized mob of Cairo or Teheran, ready to be led into a holy war on the streets by cynical politicians or whirling dervishes. "Progressive" intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre may want to think so, but every time French Communism resorts to "direct action" it finds it has to fall back on the North African sub-proletariat in France's industrial slums (who, for all that, obey the dictates of their own prophets, not of the Communist party). Only these impoverished immigrants offer the right kind of human material for the type of nationalism Communism can exploit, the nationalism of "backward areas."

The Communist party's "proletarian" character long ago became a relic of the past. While making every effort to hold on to the organized industrial masses on which its power still rests, that party long ago began reaching out in a hundred other directions. What Communism wants to win over in France is the petty-bourgeois nation itself, and therefore it systematically nurses all the resentful reflexes of a "colonial" people towards technological pressure from the outside world, and of a "proletarianized" nation towards "foreign plutocracy." Though the French middle classes are not fellahin, this sort of nationalism is very congenial to small peasants and little tradesmen who live under state protection, often on the edge of misery, in an artificially maintained, archaic economic system, and who fear any kind of real liberalism and every breath of outside air like death itself. A new type of "backward" Communist has emerged among these people; political scientists committed to the old proletarian clichés have still hardly noticed it, but the recruiting agents of Communism greet it with joy.

IT IS in this context of history that we can now understand the strange apparition of the peasant Dominici, the Neolithic patriarch—and Communist. To Dominici and his like, "Communism" and "the party" mean the same thing that the Mafia means to the peasants of Southern Italy, or that the anti-foreign secret societies of the Far East and of Africa mean to the natives there. People like Dominici were to be found during the war among certain guerrilla groups in the Resistance, and the shadowy postwar life of these latter haunted the background of this whole murder case. Thereby hangs the moral.

It takes one devil to drive out another: *French Communism acts in the place of a revived fascism*—if one can still use that word (now become an empty epithet) to designate what fascism once meant to fascists themselves: *a nationalistic "revolution" to halt social disintegration, a terroristic "racial community" to stem anarchy, a general mobilization of the economy to avert eco-*

nomic collapse, a general mobilization of the people, "like at the front," to stop class war. France, between the wars, had several more or less intellectual fascist groups, but never a fascist movement; and the descendants of those groups now amount to little more than societies of mourners for the victims of the "purge" and the collaborationists' trials. In France today—and elsewhere, too—a new fascist movement would have to link itself to a Resistance group, and take a name that smacked, above all, of anti-fascism.

France in 1939-45 did not have that "front experience" whose memory in Germany and Italy after the First World War furnished the emotional starting point for fascism, and on which de la Roque's Croix de Feu mystique fed in France—that experience of the "great comradeship of the united nation" which was contrasted to the atomization and degradation of national energies in the individual struggle for existence during the peace. The real experience of the Resistance in France was the exact opposite of "front experience": it meant the individual's refusal to obey, it meant a personal adventure, a decision for which one was responsible only to oneself—not the solidarity found through military regimentation. Whatever material the French Resistance might have offered for a "national," fascist revolution has now, for the most part, been absorbed by the Communist party.

Many of the young "activists" in the genuine or spurious Resistance movements—and there were plenty of the latter—suddenly found themselves with nothing to do at the war's end. They were easy recruits for Communism. And many, too, were the young intellectuals in rebellion against "bourgeois society" who, fifteen years ago, would have been drawn quite naturally by background and mental outlook into the patriotic leagues or the Action Française, but who nowadays, just as naturally, are drawn towards Communism. French Communism long ago took over practically all the slogans and themes of fascism—aside from its propaganda and organizational techniques, which it always shared with it. It is the Communists today who systematically exploit nationalist

hatreds, economic parochialism, and the fears of the middle class. It is they who anathematize atonal music, abstract art, and experimental literature as "alien to the people," "degenerate art," "Americanism," or "cultural fascism"—it used to be called "cultural Bolshevism." It is they who extol folklore, overstuffed Victorianism, and petty-bourgeois sentimentality as "socialist realism."

It was de Gaulle's great and desperate error to think, two years after the war's end, that he could revive the Resistance movement in order to bring about a "mobilization of national energies," a "rallying together of the French people." In France, just as everywhere else, nationalism can only be destructive today, or at best paralyzing. The social structure of petty-bourgeois France re-absorbs all free energy in the end and turns it back into old ruts. After a short period of storm and stress almost everybody goes back to the traditional *douceur de vivre*. De Gaulle's followers defended no ideal of national greatness, only their own little privileges, and after six years of misunderstanding his movement faltered to its end, bogged down in parliamentary quagmire. The true embodiment of *la France seule* was not General de Gaulle, but the village druggist.

COMMUNISM used to bear the stigma of a "foreign nationalism," and this was enough, once, to put it beyond the pale. But what meaning can this stigma still have for nations whose societies are in dissolution, and whose problems transcend every national framework? To the reproach of being a "Russian" party, the French Communists now retort that their opponents belong to the "American" one. They refer to the "satellite" status of a country dependent on foreign subsidies and whose budget is reviewed, and defenses organized, in Washington. "American colonization" has become the first and last word of all Communist propaganda, in France as in the Far East, in South America as in the Levant. This, verily, is the sort of company the Communist world organization now makes France keep.

Today, with the epithets "traitor" and

"foreign party" flying back and forth in the National Assembly, with the "agents of Moscow" abusing the "agents of Wall Street," the cry of "dollar" answering that of "ruble," and one side shouting "Munich" to the other's "Hitler-Stalin pact," it sounds as if there were no longer any French parties left in the country, but only fifth columns. One feels that the glorious national idea, after its triumphant progress around the globe, has now returned to its cradle to expire as a nationalistic conjuring up of specters.

II

THE France of the village druggist is also that of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre is, if not the greatest, at least the most representative spokesman of that "left intellectualism" which still strikes the world as the truest expression of the French spirit. Perhaps the most characteristic symptom of the crisis in the French consciousness is the way in which this spirit has, over the last ten years, succumbed to Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, and Nietzsche: the way in which it celebrates Marx's prophecies of 1848 as the final word on the human situation, Zarathustra's "God is dead" as the final illumination of the spirit, and *Beyond Good and Evil* as the last step in ethical thought—this, in a country already saturated with such ideas. The German *fin de siècle* is offered as the bold revolutionary antidote to petty-bourgeois nostalgia for the French *fin de siècle*, and St. Germain des Prés, after the Second World War, conceives its most original contribution to be the imitation, down to the last detail of attitude and tone, of the "great nausea" of post-1918 Berlin.

Here the confusion has reached that nadir which one hopes will be the beginning of a new dawn. The first and most obvious reason for the confusion is that "left," "revolutionary," and the whole vocabulary of revolt still seem, artistically as well as politically, to point out a direction. But for France, with her fossilized social structure and her mind still dominated by 1789, these terms no longer really signify a vision of the fu-

ture, but only a tradition, and therefore a past.

THE "problem" of *littérature engagée* ("committed literature") which came on the literary and literary-political stage with the Resistance and immediately monopolized it, is the problem of reconciling active cooperation in the reconstruction of the Republic with the tradition—*de rigueur* for left intellectuals in France—of rebellion against every existing, or even conceivable, terrestrial order. For the non-Communist left, it is the problem of harmonizing the inherited ideology of Jacobinism with responsible democratic action, while still not admitting that the two can be reconciled only by mystification, and that now, with a Communist mass party firmly planted in the country and the Red Army on the Elbe, they can no longer be reconciled even by that.

The pre-ordained "final goal of history" which terrorizes the whole left intelligentsia of France, anti- as well as pro-Communist, happens to be the logical projection of the French national legend itself, which sees the *nation* in its original role as liberator of *all* mankind. The problem is the insoluble one of working creatively inside social reality while remaining at the same time contemptuous, from the heights of ideological theory, of "reformism," or "meliorism," of everything realized or even realizable. This lack of connection between thought and action—even if it were only the action of a political pamphleteer—was endurable under the Third Republic's humdrum routine of revolution-roaring but quietist radicalism, but now it has deepened to a crisis in the face of the concrete, pressing problems of the postwar period. These call no longer for indignant attitudes, but for solutions. Yet the tradition of left ideology in France, no matter how irrelevant to anything real, remains sacrosanct.

The French left, with its traditional ignorance of economics and its traditional appetite for pure theory, has known Marx only as a revolutionary journalist, never as the difficult author of *Capital*; only his eschatol-

ogy—the same on which the Soviet Russian state church has been built—never his method of social and historical criticism. The result now is that the thinking of the French left is all done in slogans. Instead of a differentiated system of sociological concepts, it knows only the absolute categories of "master and slave," "rich and poor," "oppressors and oppressed." At bottom, the French left took from Marxism only Marx's misunderstanding of the "class war in France," which fitted in with its own misunderstanding of its revolutionary legend. Dragging this verbal baggage behind them, the left intelligentsia have marched into the "cold war" to plant their colors on a front that has Russia on the "left," America on the far "right"—and France, the real France of the small towns and little people, nowhere at all.

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, as leader of a whole school of intellectuals, has founded, on this disconnection between philosophic foundations and political conclusions, a real graduate school of Orwellian "double-think." As philosopher, pamphleteer, playwright, literary scatologist, and political militant, he juggles Existentialism and vulgar Marxism, all the while delivering an endless stream of patter to conceal the question of how the two can be reconciled. Is the "self-choosing" man of his Existentialism, who is the total product of himself, the reality—or the man postulated by his sociology, who is the total product of society? Sartre refuses to say. But that these two opposed conceptions should remain total and absolute—that is never questioned.

Perhaps their synthesis would be too banal for such a brilliant mind, for then it would come to no more than an old truth perceived by all Western moralists since Hesiod and since Montaigne: that the human condition is made up of both freedom *and* necessity, individuality *and* responsibility, mastery over fate *and* submission to it, glory *and* misery. It is more striking to raise each isolated term of such polarities to its abstract absurdity and leave poor, banal man, who

is neither his own creator nor a mere bundle of reflexes, to smaller minds.

Yet the individual's total lack of relatedness, as postulated by the Existentialist Sartre, and the same individual's dependence on the collectivity, as postulated by the Marxist Sartre, actually do have one thing fundamental in common: the lack of all personal responsibility for oneself or one's neighbor, and the lack therewith of all foundation for a human order. To assert the most radical individualism and at the same time to preach the total "socialization" of man (*à la* Stalin) is, however, one way of remaining superior to the so immediate, practical, unequivocal, measurable, and soluble problems of present-day France—one way to sit enthroned, and at peace, on the myth of 1789, while neither descending to the despised lowlands of "reformism," nor renouncing politics to draw back into literature. Here Sartre's case becomes exemplary for the whole intellectual crisis that afflicts France.

PEOPLE said "Sartre and Camus" at the end of the war as one once said "Schiller and Goethe." Sartre and Camus formed a double star in the sky over the new, postwar France, surrounded by the common aura of the *Zeitgeist*, with its nihilism, "despair," "absurdity," and the rebellion against God and the world. But Camus, having openly admitted from the first that his philosophy of total "absurdity" could not be squared with his attempt to find a constructive political ethic of "right action," took a different road.

From the revolution that he hailed on the day of Liberation—whose meaning he promised to define "in coming days," while contenting himself "for the moment" with defining its immediate goal, in a heap of tautologies characteristic of those days, as "the immediate establishment of a true people's and workers' democracy"—his road led to the lonely "man in revolt" whose individual rebellion was as total as it was metaphysical. The "rebel" stands outside history and society, and is in revolt against the external

meaninglessness of existence, against mortality, against the silence of the universe, "against God." More simply expressed, Camus affirms that the Politburo can be supplanted only by Prometheus himself, the total myth only by one even more total.

Camus' "revolt" is the same lonely and absolute one in which André Malraux, too, after wider and rasher detours through the civil wars of our time, through Communism, the Resistance, and Gaullism, now finds his absolute—and that sum of all man's tragedy and heroism which he had not found in revolutionary activism. For Malraux, as for Camus, the work of art becomes the highest form of action, and thus he has to speak of art in religious terms, as he himself acknowledges in his *Voices of Silence*.

IN ALL this, politics and sociology have been left far behind, even if they always are, or seem to be, implied. Is it a matter, then, for Camus and Malraux, of a flight from activism into art and metaphysics? Even if it were only that, it would be richly worthwhile. In the midst of its material paralysis, France has preserved a spiritual vitality that the technically and commercially more successful nations of Europe might envy. But even deeper sources of the French crisis than those of economic and social structure alone come to the surface at this point.

The French spirit itself, which as organized intellect lived for a century and a half without transcendence—with its roots cut, so to speak—and found its fulfillment in clarity and rationality, has now become restless. The word "fate," important yesterday only in German thought, and almost incomprehensible to the French, who believed not in fate but reason, has, with Camus and Malraux, made a violent entry into the French interior monologue. As is only too obvious from recent German history, there are dangers inherent in this concept. One can only hope that for the French it becomes a more fruitful idea than for the Germans. At least it does connote a challenge, and that challenge may impel Frenchmen to take *their* fate into their own hands at last.

III

NO ONE has expressed what has happened to France more profoundly and simply than Camus did in his *Letters to a German Friend*, which he wrote during the war, and published after Liberation. "For so many years you tried to push me into history. . . . You have done what was necessary, we have entered history. And for five years it was no longer possible to allow oneself to be made happy by the song of a bird. . . . But afterwards, too, when I judge your terrible acts, I will remember that you and I began from the same loneliness, that you and I share with all of Europe the same tragedy of the intellect."

By 1914, France had really finished and rounded off her history as a nation; she had reaped her rich harvest and desired nothing more but to endure. Two German invasions tore her from her repose. The first struck her a terrible blow; the second pulled her brutally into a European tragedy she did not wish to share and felt no complicity in. She found herself propelled into a history to which the categories of her national legend no longer applied, though she still measured the world by them. The myth of 1789, the *nation* as the supreme and absolute unity, the sovereign individual as the ultimate measure of all things—these no longer sufficed. French historical consciousness has lived wholly on the national idea, but this idea itself has lived on its extension to the super-national, the universally valid. As nationalism and nothing more, it could only negate and destroy itself.

To a frightening extent, the intellectuals who discovered the reality of Europe through

the Resistance have now forgotten once again that France is not alone and, so long as she remains France, cannot be responsible only to herself. Nothing threatens France's character, as France, more than self-isolation. And no nation is in less danger than this eldest one of losing herself, and her rich inheritance, in a greater community. Her human concept of civilization would continue to have greater power to conquer than all the imperialisms and ideologies, if only she still believed in herself. And no nation can less afford to make that tragic gesture of refusal to grow beyond itself which was first made by the Athenian city-state. For France's assimilative capacity, which with such magnificent self-confidence once trusted itself to fuse all mankind into its *civitas*, has been exhausted only to the extent that the openness and receptivity which are its condition and its deepest essence have hardened into a mistrustful and defensive self-sufficiency. France alone has grown too small for France.

Even so, no one has the right to make demands. France owes the world nothing, neither resurgence nor greatness, and certainly not that European leadership which history promised her—if she owes this to herself, that is something she alone must decide. And yet—how will France, and how will Europe, fare in the world when those who still look to her for that leadership can no longer wait? No words more movingly express the deadly lure that beckons to France today than these of Edouard Herriot that President Vincent Auriol quoted on two separate occasions to reply to a critical, unjust, and impatient world: "France has the right to withdraw into her own sorrow. . . ."